



PRESS RELEASE

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CHINESE NATIONALS PLEAD GUILTY IN MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR ALIEN SMUGGLING OPERATION

Arlington, VA..... United States Attorney for the District of Columbia Wilma A. Lewis and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) District Director, Warren A. Lewis, jointly announced that the last two of four defendants pleaded guilty yesterday to attempted smuggling of in excess of 200 Chinese aliens into the United States in December of 1999.

Defendants Yeh Hsin-Yung and Li Jian Zhou pleaded guilty to Attempted Bringing of Unauthorized Aliens to the United States for Financial Gain, and defendant Yeh Hsin-Yung also pleaded guilty to Assault on a United States Coast Guard Officer while armed. In recent weeks, defendants Lin Jian (April 19, 2000) and Wang Yuan Dian (May 5, 2000) had pleaded guilty to the same alien smuggling offense. Defendant Yeh Hsin-Yung is a citizen of Taiwan while the other three defendants are citizens of the People's Republic of China.

"This is the first prosecution of this kind, where a smuggling vessel has been intercepted in international waters and successfully prosecuted in the United States. We want to send a message, to those individuals who seek to profit from human vulnerability and desperation, that we will seek prosecution to the fullest extent of the law," said District Director Lewis.

Called "Operation Poinsettia," the case involved the smuggling of Chinese immigrants aboard the vessel named "Wing Fung Lung." The vessel, a 200-foot Russian manufactured coastal freighter transporting 259 passengers and crew from the People's Republic of China, was intercepted by the United States Coast Guard (USCG) Cutter Munro in international waters prior to the individuals' arrival in the United States. The Munro, after shadowing the freighter for approximately 48 hours starting on December 7, 1999, had reason to suspect the vessel contained human cargo. Once interdicted, the USCG guided the vessel into Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala, where a team of United States officials met the crew and passengers of the Wing Fung Lung.

Officials from INS determined that based on information received from other law enforcement officials, the final destination of the vessel was the United States. The individuals aboard the vessel were detained, processed, and interviewed in Guatemala. After their interviews were

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completed, two Assistant United States Attorneys (AUSA's) from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, were detailed to Guatemala to assist in the investigation. The AUSA's determined that there were 17 viable material witnesses who could testify to the crimes committed by the four crewmembers known as "snakeheads." The crewmembers and witnesses were returned to the United States for prosecution.

All of the immigrants interviewed reported that the cost of the trip ranged from \$10,000 (U.S.) to \$45,000 (U.S.) per passenger, which was to be paid by their families or worked off upon their arrival in the United States.

On January 8, 2000, the Grand Jury sitting for the United States District Court for the District of Columbia indicted Yeh Hsin-Yung on Assault charges. He was arraigned on January 11, 2000, and ordered held without bond at his detention hearing on January 14, 2000. The assault charge against Yeh Hsin-Yung resulted from his attack on a U.S. Coast Guard personnel during their boarding of the vessel on December 9, 1999. During the struggle, Yeh Hsin-Yung grabbed the holstered service weapon of a member of the U.S. Coast Guard boarding party in a failed attempt to secure the weapon for himself. A round was discharged during the struggle but fortunately, it went into the bulkhead of the vessel.

U. S. Attorney Wilma A. Lewis stated, "violations of our immigration laws are matters we take very seriously, even more so when the violations are at the expense of those seeking to enter the United States. Those who choose to engage in this conduct do so at their own peril and should know that we will be seeking to hold them fully accountable under the law."

All four defendants are being held in jail pending their sentencing. Defendants Yeh Hsin-Yung, Wang Yuan Dian and Li Jian Zhou are facing sentences ranging from 36 months to 54 months in jail. Lin Jian, because of his cooperation with law enforcement officials, is facing a much lower sentence. All defendants will be sentenced in late July 2000.

In announcing the guilty pleas, U.S. Attorney Lewis and District Director Lewis commended the cooperative effort of the U.S. Attorney's Office and U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, particularly officers and personnel from INS Headquarters, Office of Field Operations and Office of International Affairs and the following INS District Offices: San Diego, Mexico City, Houston, San Francisco, and New York. They would also like to thank the U. S. Coast Guard, U. S. Embassy in Guatemala and the U. S. Public Health Service. Commended also was the work of Assistant United States Attorneys Kenneth W. Cowgill and Joseph B. Valder, who

jointly prosecuted the case, and Immigration Service Agents Gerard Puckerin, James Spero, Terrence Demeroto and Winston Chow.